

web doctor

www.rakceramics.co.uk

In a series of virtual health checks, web doctor monitors the pulse of one company's online offering. This month, it's RAK Ceramics – so what's the diagnosis?



Want to know a sure-fire way to ruin or raise your Google ratings? Forget all those emails you find in your inbox about search engine optimisation that will only cost you several thousand of your hard-earned sales, or the back-end databases that can track every user and tell you which part of the country they are logging on from. The real secret to success or failure, and one that RAK Ceramics pulls off, is perversely in dumbing down. Not putting mini-screens in newspapers dumb (Gee, I wish we had access to bad quality video some other way), just in an honest, plain and simple kind of way. Wasn't it Winston Churchill with a certain prescience who said "short words are best and the old words when short are best of all"? They say words will never hurt you, but I disagree. Or don't agree...

The Google secret, and one that the experts will rarely tell you, is that as users become ever

more search-dominant in their behaviour, everything that appears on your site needs to refer back to how likely your customers are going to use those words. Old words good, new words bad.

Admittedly dressing your verbiage in its best bib and tucker is hard to resist, but if the example of the alleged Graff jewellery robbers is anything to go by, smart suits don't necessarily lend you smarts. Coining new phrases to describe the wares may feel fresh and exciting, but it could mean a slide in ranking that renders your site and its promotion possibilities a white elephant.

Unfamiliarity breeds contempt

With echoes of Marks and Spark's now infamous tagline, RAK's site has something of a personality disorder. To publicise Trilogy it

indulges in some statement-making purple prose: "This isn't just a new bathroom range, Trilogy is three completely different lifestyle themes for today's bathroom." But in its favour, its overall approach is heart-liftingly precise when it comes to its html menu. What does it call its showrooms page? 'Showrooms'. How about that dead duck of a page that we all avoid but can't live without? 'Company'. At first the contacts page was perturbing, in that it had six lines of text offering identical telephone numbers under different headings, but it makes perfect sense when you imagine that same information as search engine queries. A plain and simple answer to a plain and simple question.

While the right move may be to dumb down, conversely that doesn't preclude some Barbara Cartland-style musings, just that you have to follow some practical guidelines.

1 Double up – like RAK, product pages come with scene-setting intros, then get down to the nitty gritty with full titles, technical drawings and reference numbers. Users tend to scan for words they know and trust, so having both guns loaded with old-fashioned facts and the sparkling prose will keep them reading. There's nothing wrong with explaining your conceptual thinking: in RAK's case it shows grown-up market positioning for each of its newest suites which adds colour and depth.

2 Keywords should be key. Rather than calling something a hand-held, non-motorised excavation device, try spade. No translation necessary for your customers or the search engine matrix that could skip over 'marketese'.

3 Ban the brand! Home pages in particular should be about recognisable names, so using generic terms can tip the balance in your favour. As RAK would say, Bathrooms!



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sottini.co.uk
Sottini
 Part of the Ideal Standard family, Italian-born Sottini has carved its own niche with this long tall drink of cool water of a site
Top marks Unusually the type styles or fonts are the stars here, cleverly mimicking the elegant and classic styles, making a statement in pared-down black and grey. The rest of the page are reminiscent of Apple/Mac ads – white space used to great effect
Works well Sensibly, Sottini uses the site to collect data, but gives the visitor the carrot as well. Once the relatively short form is complete, it's possible to save products, brochures, technical datasheets and product care and installation info. Customers can also tick a box to have their details passed to a supplier
Could do better Could the accessories and brassware not be flagged up with a 'You may also like...' box within the Collections?
Suggestion box With such a stellar roll-call of designers to name-check, it is almost a lost opportunity to bury them on the link menu at the bottom of the page. Why not profile them on the home page as a pure content feature?
Attraction factor A seriously cool and collected five stars ★★★★★



pjhdistribution.co.uk
PJH Distribution
 A red on black colour combination supplies a sophisticated and bold backdrop for PJH
Top marks Credit is due for being brief and to the point. PJH know why their customers land here, and allow them to log straight into the trade section from the home page without delay
Works well A Home page link seems not to be de rigueur these days, however it is sadly missed. PJH have a firm grasp on navigation, so keep the home and help buttons at the top of the screen
Could do better Current customers will have all the contact details they could ever need, but newcomers might feel aggrieved at the online form rather than a direct dial to sales
Suggestion box PJH are currently upgrading so intelligently are collecting customer data to keep them informed
Attraction factor Punchy and confident. Four out of five ★★★★★



ideal-standard.co.uk
Ideal Standard (UK) Ltd
 It can be hard for a corporate site to be exuberant. The grey colourway is smart and subdued, but is there a sense of passion or excitement?
Top marks With such a large site, catering to both the trade and consumers, the Quick Finder drop-down allows those with less time to get straight to the point
Works well More a portal than anything, the trade can order spare parts, or homeowners can plan their bathroom online with the interactive widget
Could do better Having individual downloadable brochures for the ranges cuts back on excess bandwidth usage, but could someone not have removed the printers' marks from the pdfs to make them a bit more presentable?
Suggestion box This is a rare time that a splash screen asking whether the visitor is consumer or trade could simplify things
Attraction factor Though large it's easy to use. Four out of five ★★★★★



idealbathrooms.com
Ideal Bathrooms Ltd
 When consumers are not your target, how should a trade site behave, and will it every become an integral part of the relationship?
Top marks Ideal is obviously proud of its sales office with a staff of 30, and makes plenty of the fact there is no call centre on its site. Just helpful sales staff
Works well As a distributor, Ideal knows that a sexy web site isn't what its customers want or need, so keeps it tight and organised in six sections
Could do better It's often said that image montages are the result of poor imagination, which is why the home page creates a less than exciting vibe
Suggestion box Drop the date, time and bookmark link and provide functions for your trade customer to help them do business with you online, such as web-based quotations?
Attraction factor Surprisingly full of useful info. Four out of five ★★★★★



heritagebathrooms.com
Heritage Bathrooms
 A Flash home page slideshow acts as a slick introduction to the main products with top quality imagery
Top marks Not only are the designers made good use of in marketing terms, there are even clickable thumbnails to see some of their work for Roca
Works well The search for new and innovative designers is heralded by a link to jump the gap, Roca's insightful competition to attract fresh ideas
Could do better The news page is lacking anything current, only information from late 2008, but the site was very recently updated, so why not this section?
Suggestion box Installation guides are a highly customer-friendly offering, however there must be a way to get these into English!
Attraction factor Organised navigation, but loses points for varied access points such as pdfs and e-catalogues. Three out of five ★★★★★



roca-uk.com
Roca Ltd
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http://uk.vitra.com.tr/
Vitra UK
 If web sites can indeed be male or female as the ad men claim, then Vitra's online presence has a beguilingly womanly outlook
Top marks The navigation is nothing if not uncomplicated, but a Quick Find bar takes precedence on the home page for the truly time-poor browser
Works well An extra menu bar within the sections means you can switch between categories via links rather than use the dreaded back button
Could do better Mouse rollovers would solve the problem of new visitors not knowing the product names off the top of their heads and getting needlessly lost in the product menu
Suggestion box Some sections have name tags, but no content. It's worth either populating these pages or investing in an online catalogue
Attraction factor Impactful design wins out. Three out of five ★★★★★



impulsebathrooms.co.uk
Impulse Bathrooms Products Ltd
 Impulse are trying something different here, believing that news features cater best to its clientele
Top marks This site's blog style is intriguing, as it circumnavigates the need for high-end Flash and instead sets up a newsy dialogue between the company and its customers
Works well Rather than add page of product pictures and descriptions, Impulse lets its brochure in pdf form do all the work instead
Could do better Some grainy images, including the logo on every page, can be easily fixed but dilutes the overall effect, drawing the eye away from content
Suggestion box How about an RSS news feed that loyal customers can subscribe to, ensuring every post lands in their inbox with no effort at all?
Attraction factor No prizes for style, but plenty for substance however it needs to be updated. Two out of five ★★★★★



laufen.co.uk
Laufen
 First impressions here create an odd dissonance. The home page is a simply a couple of paragraphs of blurb
Top marks Any contractor would be more than happy with the wealth of facts and figures supplied on the product pages, which leave nothing to chance
Works well The site achieves its low-key objectives with six sections by organising sub-sections in a rollover menu at the top of the page. No need to go looking about and its loads quick as you like!
Could do better The Product overview landing page currently has missing images. Ok they serve no function, but their absence is a notable mis-step
Suggestion box The mini menu of functions such as search and language is worth expanding, both in size and function, especially as the home page doesn't currently act as a landing site
Attraction factor Does it really do the products justice? Two out of five ★★★★★

web watch

bathroom suites

Will it be three times a charm for bathroom suppliers and manufacturers with a whole suite of products to push?



First past the post...

Personality counts for a lot online, especially considering the short attention span of the average visitor, so sparkling images and carefully chosen type can easily achieve an instant brand recognition without cluttering pages with content that can get out of date overnight. Sottini have opted for white space over elements that won't tell its story, allowing pictures and the small amount of text to breathe. Sometimes it pays to consider leaving the detail to later if your customer base is as discerning as your designs